



**Our Fathers Among the Saints Athanasius and Cyril,
Archbishops of Alexandria,
Whom the Holy Church Celebrates on January 18.**

In the half-century after the First Ecumenical Council held in Nicea in 325, if there was one man whom the Arians feared and hated more intensely than any other, as being able to lay bare the whole error of their teaching, and to marshal, even from exile or hiding, the beleaguered forces of the Orthodox, it was *Saint Athanasius the Great*. This blazing lamp of Orthodoxy, which imperial power and heretics' plots could not quench when he shone upon the lampstand, nor find when he was hid by the people and monks of Egypt, was born in Alexandria about the year 296. He received an excellent training in Greek letters and especially in the sacred Scriptures, of which he shows an exceptional knowledge in his writings. Even as a young man he had a remarkable depth of understanding; he was only about twenty years old when he wrote his treatise *On the Incarnation*. Saint Alexander, the Archbishop of Alexandria, brought him up in piety, ordained him his deacon, and, after deposing Arius for his blasphemy against the Divinity of the Son of God, took Athanasius to the First Council in Nicea in 325; Saint Athanasius was to spend the Remainder of his life labouring in defense of this holy Council. In 326, before his death, Alexander appointed Athanasius his successor.

In 325, Arius had been condemned by the Council of Nicea; yet through Arius' hypocritical confession of Orthodox belief, Saint Constantine the Great was persuaded by Arius' supporters that he should be received back into the

communion of the Church. But Athanasius, knowing well the perverseness of his mind, and the disease of heresy lurking in his heart, refused communion with Arius. The heresiarch's followers then began framing false charges against Athanasius; finally Saint Constantine the Great, misled by grave charges of the Saint's misconduct—which were completely false—had him exiled to Triberis (Treves) in Gaul in 336. When Saint Constantine was succeeded by his three sons, Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius in 337, Saint Athanasius returned to Alexandria in triumph. But his enemies found an ally in Constantius, Emperor of the East; Saint Athanasius' second exile was spent in Rome. It was ended when Constans prevailed with threats upon his brother Constantius to restore Athanasius (see also Nov. 6). For ten years Saint strengthened Orthodoxy throughout Egypt, visiting the whole country and encouraging all, clergy, monastics, and layfolk, being loved by all as a father. But after Constans' death in 350, Constantius became sole Emperor, and Athanasius was again in danger. In the evening of February 8, 356, General Syrianus with more than five thousand soldiers surrounded the church in which Athanasius was serving, and broke open all the doors. Athanasius' clergy begged him to leave, but the good shepherd commanded that all the flock should withdraw first; and only when he was assured of their safety, he also, protected by divine grace, passed through the midst of the soldiers and disappeared into the deserts of Egypt, where for some six years he eluded the soldiers and spies sent after him.

When Julian the Apostate succeeded Constantius in 361, Athanasius returned again, but only for a few months. Because Athanasius had converted many pagans, and the priests of the idols in Egypt wrote to Julian that if Athanasius remained, idolatry would perish in Egypt, the heathen Emperor ordered not Athanasius' exile, but his death. Athanasius took ship up the Nile. When he learned that his imperial pursuers were following him, he had his men turn back, and as his boat passed that of his pursuers, they asked him if he had seen Athanasius. "He is not far," he answered. After returning to Alexandria for a while, he fled again to the Thebaïd until Julian's death in 363. Saint Athanasius suffered his fifth and last exile under Valens in 365, which lasted only four months because Valens, fearing a sedition among the Egyptians for their beloved Archbishop, revoked his edict in February, 366.

The great Athanasius passed the remaining seven years of his life in peace. Of his forty-seven years as Patriarch, he had spent some seventeen in exiles. Shining from the height of his throne like a radiant evening star, and enlightening the Orthodox with the brilliance of his words for yet a little while, this much-suffering champion inclined toward the sunset of his life, and, in the year 373, took his rest from his lengthy sufferings, but not before another luminary of the truth, Basil the Great, had risen in the East, being consecrated

Archbishop of Caesarea in 370. Besides all his other achievements, Saint Athanasius wrote the life of Saint Anthony the Great, with whom he spent time in his youth; ordained Saint Frumentius first Bishop of Ethiopia; and in his Paschal Encyclical for the year 367 set forth the books of the Old and New Testaments accepted by the Church as canonical. Saint Gregory the Theologian, in his Oration *On the Great Athanasius*, said he was “Angelic in appearance, more angelic in mind;...rebuking with the tenderness of a father, praising with the dignity of a ruler...everything was harmonious, as an air upon a single lyre, and in the same key; his life, his teaching, his struggles, his dangers, his return, and his conduct after his return...he treated so mildly and gently those who had injured him, that even they themselves, if I may say so, did not find his restoration distasteful.”

Saint Cyril was also from Alexandria, born about the year 376, the nephew of Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria, who also instructed the Saint in his youth. Having first spent having spent much time with the monks in Nitria, he later became the successor to his uncle’s throne in 412. In 429, when Cyril heard tidings of the teachings of the new Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, he began attempting through private letters to bring Nestorius to renounce his heretical teachings about the Incarnation; and when the heresiarch did not repent, Saint Cyril, together with Pope Celestine of Rome, led the Orthodox opposition to his error. Saint Cyril presided over the Third Ecumenical Council of the 200 holy Fathers in the year 431, who gathered in Ephesus under Saint Theodosius the Younger. At this Council, by his most wise words he put to shame and convicted the impious doctrine of Nestorius, who, although he was in town, refused to appear before Cyril. Saint Cyril, besides overthrowing the error of Nestorius, has left to the Church full commentaries on the Gospels of Luke and John. Having shepherded the Church of Christ for thirty-two years, he reposed in 444.

Rest from labour. Wine and oil allowed.

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Dismissal Hymn. Third Tone
Thy confession

SHINING forth with works of Orthodoxy, * ye quenched every false belief and teaching * and became trophy-bearers and conquerors. * And since ye made

all things rich with true piety, * greatly adorning the Church with magnificence, * Athanasius and wise Cyril, ye both have worthily * found Christ God, Who doth grant great mercy unto all.

Kontakion. Fourth Tone
On this day Thou hast appeared

GREAT high priests of piety * and noble champions * of the holy Church of Christ, * keep and preserve all those who chant: * O most compassionate Lord, do Thou * graciously save those who faithfully honour Thee.

SYNAXARION

Verses

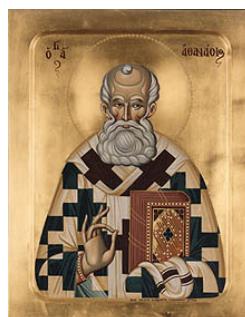
Athanasius hath died, yet I call him living,
For the righteous live, though by death they be taken.

Today the memorial of the exile of Cyril,
But not his ever-mem'able death, creation keepeth.

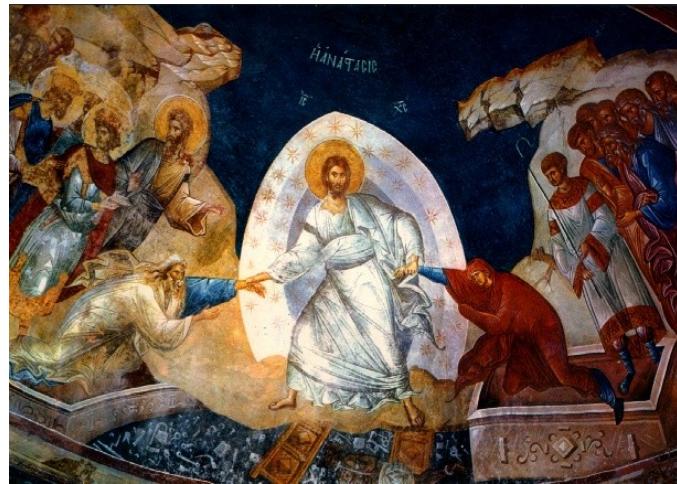
On the eighteenth buried they Athanasius' dead body.

EXAPOSTILARION
Second tone. Upon them that mount in Galilee

YE proved to be initiates * and truly wise defenders of * the transcendent Trinity, * O blessed Athanasius, * and Cyril, thou God-revealer; * for ye destroyed completely * Arius and Sabellius * and Nestorius also, * the most profane, * yea, and every other deceit and error * of all ungodly heresies, O Hierarchs of the Lord God.



THE HOLY ICONS HAVE THEIR BASIS IN HOLY TRADITION PART 2



HOLY PASCHA

Thus far in our brief study of the Orthodox Church's Iconography, we have come upon some landmarks which are, as holy Scripture attests, immovable; "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set" (Prov. 22:28).

We can review these Landmarks. The Icon is an outcome of, and based upon, the Saviour's Incarnation. The icon and the Gospel go hand in hand. To deny the Icon is to deny Christ. The icon's point of view topples the world's standard; in the icon sorrow is transfigured into the joy of the living God (Heb. 10:21). It prophetically points to the new heaven and the new earth (cf. Rev. 21:1) which participate in the deification of Adam through the second Adam. The icon itself breathes the redemptive air of prayer, and gently draws our spirits into renewed contact with "the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7), the uncreated, all-creative divine energy. The Icon, like holy Scripture, is woven into the warp and woof of holy Tradition. If, as St. John of Damascus says somewhere, you pull one thread out of a woven garment, including the Church's Tradition, the whole garment unravels; the best thing to do is to leave that thread alone so that the garment, and holy Tradition, remain intact.

The Icon has mystagogical status in the Liturgical Tradition of the Church. Before and during Vespers, Matins, the Blessing of the Waters, of the Kolyva, the reading of the Gospel, the beginning of the Divine Liturgy (this list is endless), the clergy cense all the Icons in the Church. In their Icons, the Saints often choose to unfold mysteries and guide the faithful into a fruitful understanding of them.

It is refreshing to recall how the Saints whose icons were painted on the walls of the altar in Papa Nicholas Planas' Churches used to stretch out a

foot when Papa Nicholas came around to venerate then as he censed (he was short in stature). He censed the icon and kissed the Saint's foot, then moved on. An icon is a living thing.

The Perpetuation of Pentecost is just what the Church is. The Church is, accordingly, the sole bearer of sacred Tradition. It may help us to see holy Tradition as not only the voice of the past but also the voice of eternity. Our Lord, the Holy Spirit, causes His grace to flow uninterruptedly in the Church; He reveals the truth and strengthens us all in all truth (Jn. 16: 13).

The holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 said that we should venerate the holy Icons. The Fathers made an important distinction: although we should venerate the icon, we do not offer adoration to it. Adoration (*λατρεία*) is offered only to God; we offer the same veneration (*προσκύνησις*) to the icon that we offer to the Cross and to the Gospel.

The Greek text of the Council was sent to Pope Hadrian I in Rome. The Greek was translated into Latin and the historians say that the trouble began here. This translation was grossly inaccurate; Anastasius the Librarian prepared another one that was accurate. It did not help. A major error in the first translation was to have translated the Greek *προσκύνησις* (veneration) by the Latin *adoratio* (worship).

Charlemagne was outraged when he saw the text. He could not read (even so, he kept Augustine's *The City of God*, written in Latin, under his pillow) but, on the advice of his theologians, caused the *Libri Carolini*, a work in four volumes, to be written in 790-792. (*Libri Carolini*, in rough translation, means "Charlemagne's Books".) Pope Hadrian I knew what the Council Fathers had said, why they had said it, and totally agreed with them. He attempted to defend the Council, but his energetic defense fell on Charlemagne's deaf ears. Charlemagne won the argument.

Let's try to go back a bit. On the first page of this presentation, we spoke of a distinction *in God*, one that did not impair the *unity of God*, between the unknowable divine *essence* and the knowable and participatable divine *energies*. Both the divine essence and the divine are uncreated, and are God, because God is One (Deut. 6:4; Mk. 12:29). This comes from the authority of St. Dionysius the Aeropagite, converted by St. Paul in Athens through his sermon on "The Unknown God" (see Acts 17: 16-34). It is part of the Apostolic Tradition and is found in St. Dionysius' *"On the Divine Names,"* a first century text.

He tells us that this distinction *in God*, and there are other such distinctions, are "hierarchic" distinctions. This lets us know that our Orthodox hierarchs act in concert with one another. The Slavic term for this way of doing things is 'Sobornost,' or, Conciliarity. Before doing anything, the hierarchs wait until they have carefully reviewed the matter and all points of view have been heard. Then, after a consensus has been reached, the hierarchs vote. So a Conciliar decision is reached that way.

Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo Regius on the coast of North Africa (354-430) dismissed holy Tradition which embraces God as both unknowable in His essence and approachable through uncreated grace in His energies.

Augustine, who was brilliant, reverted to pagan thought. Neither he, nor his Pope who forbade any open discussion or censure of him, proceeded along conciliar lines.

Augustine taught that God was like an uncarved block of stone. We can know about Him, but we cannot know or participate in His life and activity at all. Augustine said that God is all essence, out of man's reach, unknowable and unapproachable. He used the term, 'grace,' as what he took to be a connection between his philosophical deity and man, but he said that this 'grace' is created. He allowed for no uncreated, divine energies; his system permits no true, grace filled communion with its pagan notion of the deity.

Most of us, having been raised in the West, have grown up to think about God in this Augustinian way with its notion of an inaccessible deity and created grace. This was the way that the illiterate Charlemagne and his advisors had come to think. Sad to say, they were not thinking like Orthodox Christians. This way of thinking about God put them at irreconcilable odds with the holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

Why is this so?

One point should, I hope, help to shed a little light on things. (Please take your time with this; if you'd like to, read the next page or so twice, or please email me: frtheodore@homb.org).

In many of our parishes, just before the Faithful receive the holy Mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood, the Priest reads the Prayers before Communion. This is the first prayer:

I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou
art truly the Christ, the Son of the Living
God, Who camest into the world to save
sinners of whom I am chief. Furthermore,
I believe that This is indeed Thine
immaculate Body, and that This is indeed
Thy precious Blood. Wherefore, I pray
Thee: Have mercy on me and forgive me
my transgressions, voluntary and
involuntary, in word and deed, in knowledge
and in ignorance. And vouchsafe that
uncondemned I may partake of Thine
immaculate Mysteries, unto the remission
of sins and unto life everlasting.

Charlemagne's theological staff took offense when the Orthodox responded that there is a true communion and participation in God when we

receive the Body and Blood of Christ just as there is when we venerate an icon.

There is a difference, too. In the Mystery of the altar the Orthodox receive "....indeed Thine immaculate Body, and...indeed Thy precious Blood" (cf. Jn. 6:53-56). There is neither the Lord's Body nor His Blood to be received when we venerate His, or any, icon. Nevertheless, the communion with the uncreated divine energies and light is a true communion in either case, as is also the case when we say the Jesus Prayer.

Following St. Dionysius the Aeropagite and those who follow him in holy Tradition, the holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, Ss. Basil the Great and Gregory Palamas (to name but a few), the Orthodox have a sense of there being a truth beyond words that has not been available to the West since the pagan thinking brought in by Augustine took over around the eighth century in the West (see our Father Michael Azkoul's writings).

Never having imported pagan thinking, such a thing does not even cross Orthodox minds. As the Apostle affirms, the Church walks "by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). This Faith is "The holy and Blameless Faith of the Pious and Orthodox Christians", which is "the Faith once delivered to the Saints" (Jude 3), the Faith about which the Saviour raises that vital question, "when the Son of man cometh, shall He find the Faith on the earth?" Our Orthodox Faith nourishes us.

So, when Charlemagne's people, who, as taught by Augustine, believed that they could not have a true communion with their God since He has no uncreated divine energies which would permit them to bathe in and be healed by His Uncreated power and life in their souls and bodies, heard the Orthodox speaking of two ways of having a true communion with God, they, wrongly, thought that when the Orthodox taught that, since there is a transformation of the bread and wine in the mystery of the Altar, so the Orthodox were also saying that the Icons were also somehow transformed.

The Orthodox never said that, but that is what Charlemagne's staff heard.

We can see that the two parties were not "on the same page" as we would say today.

Perhaps our discussion can help us see how Augustine's break with holy Tradition brought about this deep and lasting misunderstanding. The chasm between Orthodoxy and the Augustinian West that we see in the eighth century, even before the Schism of 1054, remains. The West has a different God; that is why we are different men.

And to our God be glory.

